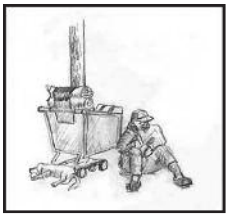

750,000 homeless Americans

I just read a quote of Erica Eichelberger's from Mother Jones. Her quote was kind but she made a claim "of the country's roughly 643,000 street folk" which is often repeated by people supportive of the rights of the homeless. Tavis Smiley and Dr. Cornel West quote this figure in their great book "**The Rich and the Rest of Us** "

This figure however has been reported since at least 1987 and maybe even before that. If you google 750,000 Americans you will find that this number has been used year after year yet as someone that has been sharing food with the hungry since 1980 I can assure you that the numbers are increasing every year. After the 2008 housing crisis the numbers sky rocketed. I have the two quotes at the end that are by people that seek to support the homeless but report that the number is still about 750,000. It is clear that there has been a huge increase in the number of people living on our streets. This doesn't even start to account for the tens of thousands of "new" homeless in Europe or other countries because of the current economic crisis.

I think it is important to do what we can to determine how many millions of us are living on the streets. To claim that the number has not changed in over 20 years can give the impression the economy has been stable and the capitalism is not failing millions in our country. Sure for each homeless person it is tragic having to struggle against anti-homeless laws and face all the hardships of cold, heat, hunger and the difficulty of accessing showers and toilets but when viewed as a personal crisis for millions that is increasing every year this becomes the national emergency it really is.

The debate around the number of homeless is also important in a second way. The people working with the homeless can be divided into two camps. One line of thought is that the homeless are in this condition because of personal failing and that the the economic system is basically fine. The other line of thought is that the increase in homelessness is directly caused by intentional economic policies that have cause an increase in unemployment, foreclosed houses and larger numbers seeking food and shelter. If we claim the number of homeless has remained the same since 1987 this supports the idea that we have a population of people that are afflicted with personal issues like addictions and poor morals that keeps these people on the streets and suggests that the best we can do is provide charity. If as is the fact that the number of people forced to live on our streets has increased this suggests that the housing crisis, failure to fund healthcare and education and policies like the North American Free Trade Agreement are responsible for the crisis not personal failings.

When I started sharing food on the streets in Boston in 1980 there were very few homeless. On March 26, 1981 I spoke at the Pine Street Inn about a protest against the Bank of Boston to be held later that day at noon. We warned that if the Bank of Boston and the Reagan administration implemented their new policies Americans would find themselves eating at soup kitchens. The veterans at the inn came to the protests and suggested we start providing food every day because Boston didn't have any soup kitchens in 1981. When I tell this story today people are visibly shocked to learn that there were not thousands of homeless people wondering the streets of America. It is clear we can end homelessness by ending the policies that cause homelessness. There are more than two abandoned foreclosed homes for every homeless American. This is the struggle the first camp does not want to acknowledge. This is one reason I feel Food Not Bombs should be more than a charity but should bring signs, banners and literature to every meal and figure out how they can reach the most people possible. It is not enough to feed people when you know it is possible for everyone to have a safe home and food they can cook in their own kitchen.

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Dec 30, 1987 - Nation's Homeless Veterans Battle a New Foe: Defeatism - New ... www.nytimes.com › COLLECTIONS › HOMELESS PEOPLE - Dec 30, 1987 – Hundreds of homeless people live in the park behind the sprawling ... Tent 31, where Jay Martin lives, is decorated with a small American ... Estimates of homeless veterans range from 230,000 to more than 750,000, about ..

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Dec 1, 2010 - Homeless Services Non-Profit In Long Beach Wins - Long Beach Post www.lbpost.com › News Dec 1, 2010 – Efforts to address and tackle the problem of homelessness received a ... as Mental Health America will receive grants worth $750000 over the ...

Aug 1, 2012 - Homelessness & Affordable Housing Sunday | Unbound justiceunbound.org/.../homelessness-affordable-housing-sunda... Aug 1, 2012 – 750,000 to 1 million people sleep on the streets every night. ... already a crippling situation for a growing not-so-invisible class of Americans.

2012 -At the time of this writing, about 680,00 people were experiencing homelessness on any given night in the United States, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness. There is no reason to believe that number has been reduced by any significant amount since.- **The Rich and the Rest of Us - by Tavis Smiley and Dr. Cornel West**

2012 - A recent report by the US Interagency Council on Homelessness blasted the national wave of out-of-sight-out-of-mind laws affecting many of the country's roughly 643,000 street folk: - **By Erica Eichelberger Mother Jones**

Ignoring Homeless Families

Published on Saturday, April 20, 2013 by The Nation
by Greg Kaufmann

More than one-third of Americans who use shelters annually are parents and their children. In 2011, that added up to more than 500,000 people. According to Joe Volk, CEO of Community Advocates in Milwaukee, prevalent family homelessness is no accident.

"In 2000, we as a nation—and the Department of Housing and Urban Development—made the terrible decision to abandon homeless children and their families," said Volk, speaking at a Congressional briefing on The American Almanac of Family Homelessness, authored by the Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness. "Families for a decade have been ignored."

As the Almanac makes clear, federal attention and resources have focused instead on chronically homeless single adults—usually the most visible homeless people in communities across the country, most of whom have severe intellectual or physical disabilities. There was a recognition that it is far less expensive to place these men and women in their own apartments with access to social services—called the "Housing First" model—than to continue paying the long-term costs associated with jail time, and recurring treatment at emergency rooms and hospitals.

The federal government's plan was to use the savings gained by reducing homelessness among single adults to fight family homelessness. But that hasn't happened.

Since 2007, there has been a 19 percent decline in chronically homeless single adults. In contrast, family homelessness has increased by more than 13 percent over the same period. Matthew Adams, principal policy analyst for ICPH, noted that the number of homeless school-aged children surpassed 1 million for the first time during the 2011-12 school year—a 57 percent increase since 2006-07.

"This is basically all a result of focusing our fiscal and human capital solely on single adults," said Adams. Despite a rise in extreme poverty, a decline in affordable housing, a shortage of rental subsidies, high unemployment and a foreclosure crisis, this strategy hasn't changed—with the exception of provisions in the Recovery Act that are now expired.

While the long-term costs of family homelessness are more difficult to quantify than are those costs associated with single adult homelessness, they are nevertheless significant and real (costs to the nation's character aside).

The Almanac explores the toll that housing instability, poor nutrition and lack of quality health care takes on homeless children: they experience twice the rate of chronic illnesses; twice the rate of learning disabilities; and three times the rate of emotional or behavioral problems as their peers who have stable housing. Homeless children have less than half the rate of proficiency in math and reading as their housed classmates. It's not surprising that less than one in four homeless children graduates from high school—what's surprising is that that one child manages to graduate at all. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act is supposed to ensure that all homeless students have equal access to education. But despite the dramatic rise in homeless students since 2006, only one in five school districts receives education assistance grants to help them.

To the extent that family homelessness is on the federal government's agenda at all—and there is a federal goal to end family homelessness by 2020 (the goal for ending single adult and veteran homelessness is 2015)—there is real concern among many advocates that HUD is attempting to use the "Housing First" approach to help homeless families. Although they agree that it has shown success with single adults, these advocates argue that it simply isn't the right solution for many—or even most—homeless families.

"It's a whole different dynamic for families," said Volk, who operates shelters and permanent housing for both single adults and families.

Volk said that an intellectually or physically disabled homeless single adult is usually able to qualify for Supplemental Security Income (SSI), which is $770 per month in Wisconsin. That stable income is sufficient to rent a fully furnished apartment with utilities paid in his state.

In contrast, a single mother must apply for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which in Wisconsin is $653 per month no matter the size of the family. She then must meet a work requirement, arrange for child care, buy furniture and pay for utilities, among other challenges. If her child is sick and she stays home from work, she is sanctioned by the TANF program. She might lose her $653 assistance, consequently fall behind on rent and begin her slide towards homelessness again.
Dona Anderson, director of ICHP, said there is way too much emphasis on getting families out of shelters quickly, rather than making sure they don't return to the shelter again.

"What could we do if we could serve families in a dedicated, serious fashion for 12 to 24 months? And really address those education barriers, employment barriers, really get these families stabilized so that once they leave a shelter we don't see them coming back?" said Anderson. "Can we address those deeper-seeded needs rather than just the initial crisis that brought them to the shelter?"

Volk agreed.
"We're moving people out of shelters too fast and then we wonder why they don't succeed," he said. "They don't succeed because we didn't give them enough time and enough support before they moved out. We need to rethink how we work with homeless families."

Anderson spoke of a 16-year-old in New York City who was homeless in junior high school. He lived in a shelter "targeted for him" and was able to participate in a high quality after-school program, residential summer camp, and a youth employment program. He's now a successful student who is looking at colleges. In contrast, she met a 4-year-old homeless child in Las Vegas who has no access to a shelter, and is bouncing between motels and hotels with his father, getting by on a fast food diet. He lacks the stable environment "that kids that age especially need in order to develop and grow and be ready for school."

"I tell these stories to illustrate the differences in how children are served, and how they aren't served, when they are experiencing homelessness," said Anderson.

The Almanac includes recommendations for what the 113th Congress can do for homeless families now, including: converting the mortgage interest deduction into a tax credit—as proposed under the Common Sense Housing Investment Act—in order to permanently fund The National Housing Trust Fund (NHTF) and support Section 8 rental assistance. (The NHTF was enacted by Congress in 2008 to increase the supply of affordable housing units, but it has never been funded.) There are now just 3.7 million housing units for every 10 million extremely low-income renters. Another key recommendation is to implement the reforms laid out in the Improving Access to Child Care for Homeless Families Act—pretty fundamental for homeless parents to have access to child care if they are going to find stable housing and jobs.

But the first step—the big step—seems to be this: see the problem of family homelessness, admit it and commit to doing something about it. And don't for a second believe that working with a single adult is the same thing as working with a family with so many moving parts.

"We can solve the problem of people living on the street for both singles and families at the same time," said Volk. "It doesn't have to be an either/or, and it can't be—as long as we have children that have to live out on the streets."

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